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AUBREY GHENT & FRIENDS

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SACRED LAP STEEL GUITAR FROM TENNESSEE



**Wednesday
October 17, 2007
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Coolidge Auditorium
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AUBREY GHENT

SACRED STEEL VIRTUOSO FROM NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Behind the music now known as “Sacred Steel” is an unlikely story—that the electric steel guitar, a country music instrument with Hawaiian roots, has had a secret second life in Black Gospel music. For almost sixty years it was familiar only to African-American congregations at House of God churches, mostly in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. But since the 1990s, the secret has gotten out, as players from this little-known tradition have gained exposure to a larger, nationwide listenership. It’s not surprising that their exhilarating, blues-infused performances have been causing a stir in roots music circles and beyond.

With popularization, however, Sacred Steel faces a dilemma about musical context and purpose. Whatever its blues sensibilities, it’s deeply religious music. In House of God services, the steel has a liturgical role, as does the organ in other denominations. The players connect emotionally and spiritually with their church audiences as an integral part of Pentecostal worship and praise. In other settings, however, there are surely questions: Is something lost in translation to a “good time” crowd? Will new audiences respect the religious nature of the music? Should musicians spread the gospel or entertain when they “play out?” How should they field pressure to secularize their music?

Other gospel performers have faced these concerns before, and many have simply chosen to pursue secular careers. For Aubrey Ghent, however, that’s not been an option. Both a minister and a musician, he was born in 1959 into a family linked to the very beginnings of the Sacred Steel tradition. His uncle Willie Eason was one of its pioneer masters, and his father Henry Nelson became a renowned player as well. During his boyhood in Fort Pierce, FL, Ghent learned lap steel basics from his father and cousins, and his grandfathers collaborated to buy him his first instrument. His spirited intensity as a preacher as well as a player earned him a reputation as a “Gospel Tornado.” Aubrey’s wife Lori became his musical partner, and they’ve dedicated much of their life together to his ministry in the House of God Keith Dominion.

When performance opportunities outside the church arose, he kept his religious calling front and center, yet he’s let the power of his music do most of the talking for his convictions. It’s a delicate but effective balance, which welcomes new audiences and non-believers into his music on his terms, and leaves them moved by its spiritual depth as well as his enormous creativity and technique. Ghent’s easy charisma and finesse about the religious core of his music has afforded him a trademark of sorts in his recently expanded career. As one reviewer puts it, “Ghent takes you to church.” He’s billed himself at points as “Steelin’ in the Name of the Lord.”

Like the earliest Sacred Steel players, Aubrey Ghent makes

his music on a single-neck lap steel, the first electrified adaptation of the acoustic Hawaiian guitar. The instrument is played horizontally, and the strings are noted with a steel “slide” and picked individually with thumb and fingers. With more variation in pitch than a fretted guitar, it lends itself to emotive, voice-like effects as well as melody. Ghent was among the first players to come to the attention of folklorist Bob Stone in his groundbreaking work documenting the genre for the Florida Folklife Program. He was included on the 1995 CD “Sacred Steel: Traditional Sacred African-American Steel Guitar Music in Florida,” supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1997, the Arhoolie label reissued this recording as well as a Ghent solo CD, “Can’t Nobody Do Me Like Jesus,” which led to performance opportunities across the country. In 2000, his ministerial work brought Aubrey and Lori a move to Nashville, TN, where he’s ironically found himself in the hometown of country steel guitar, and where most steel players now use multi-neck, pedal-enhanced versions of the instrument.

In Nashville, Aubrey’s taken on a full band and broadened his touring activity as an ambassador for Sacred Steel, which now includes appearances at the National Folk Festival, New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, National Black Arts Festival, Austin City Limits, Memphis in May, South by Southwest, Chicago Blues Festival, Poconos Blues Festival, and the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. He’s done concert work with gospel figures including Shirley Caesar, Albertina Walker, and Tremaine Hawkins, and in blues venues with Susan Tedeschi and the Derek Trucks Band. Aubrey and Lori have produced two more CDs on their own entitled “Everything Will Be Alright” and “What a Time.” European tours have taken them to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and France. Both *Vintage Guitar* and *Juke Blues* magazines have recently done features on Aubrey and his playing. His website is www.aubreyghent.com.

Bob Stone’s detailed history of Sacred Steel is slated for future publication by University of Illinois Press.

Robert Cogswell
Folklife Program
Tennessee Arts Commission

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

